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# Oral History Transcription with John Brown

John Brown

Berthe Olson

Eleanor Fallon

Richard Hede

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Interview with John Brown by Richard Hede on March 5, 1995  
in Middletown, CT.

Also in the room are Bertha Olson and John's sister, Eleanor  
Fallon.

John: How are you doing, Richie?

Richard: Good. Busy, busy, busy.

J: What have you been doing up in Maine?

R: Historical stuff, I've been doing a lot of Historical  
work, and this year we are having a 125th anniversary of the  
coming of the Swedes to northern Maine.

I want to get right down to business.

J: laugh

R: Every year we put out a calendar for the coming year.

We've already put out the 1995 calendar and now we're  
working on the 1996 calendar, because we put it out a few  
months ahead of time. On the calendar we have a picture and  
a little biography of all the people who have turned 90  
years old during that year. They tell me that you are going  
to be 90 years old in October.

J: Yeah.

R: So I want to have your permission to put your picture and  
a little write-up in there, because your grandparents lived  
up there and you lived up there and your folks also.

J: Yeah. At times, yeah.

R: Do you remember living in the little red tin house?

J: Yes, up the hill.

R: Yeah.

J: Yes, grammy's.

R: Yeah. If you don't mind, I want to record this, too.

I'm not too good at taking notes, so i'll put it on here.

Now, I didn't ask Eleanor, but I'd like to get a picture of  
you in uniform.

J: No, I never had pictures taken.

R: Is that right, gee whiz. Well, maybe we'll find one  
somewhere, but it would be nice if we had one of you in  
uniform.

I have to ask you a few questions to put in this little  
write-up, and I know who your parents were, of course. And  
I think I know when you were born, but I'd better ask you.

J: October 3, 1905.

R: Were you born in Naugatuck?

J: Yes, the old Lewis homestead.

R: And how long did you live there?

J: About six months, we moved to New Haven after that.

R: Oh, you moved to New Haven after that.

J: Yeah, my father pitched for Winchester's for ten years.

R: My uncle Rudy, your uncle too, was a good ball player  
too, wasn't he?

J: Yes, he was. He was a first baseman.

R: You know, he's still living up in Biddeford?

J: He is?

R: Yes, and he's sharp as a tack.

J: He is? How old is he?

R: He's 98.  
J: laugh You'd never know it.  
R: O.K. Then I was going to ask you, how long did you live in New Haven?  
J: Forty five years, or so.  
R: Do you remember when the folks moved up to Maine, the first time?  
J: I don't remember the year, but I was about fourteen.  
R: And how long were you up there that time, was it just for the summer.  
J: Just for the summer, yeah.  
R: Was that when you were in the ...  
J: No, I was too young then.  
R: That was when you lived in that red, tin house.  
J: There was a lot of stuff on the floor.  
R: How long were you there?  
J: Just for the summer.  
R: And then you went back to New Haven?  
J: Yeah.  
R: And then you moved up again after that, just for a visit?  
J: Yeah.  
R: Do you remember any of the people from up there?  
J: I don't remember any of them, there was a fellow named Wilson.  
R: Oh, yeah. Ballplayer, probably.  
J: I don't know. A friend of my father. My father worked in the mill.  
R: Oh, yeah. Oh, he did work in the mill that summer.  
J: Many worked in the mill.  
R: What did he do?  
J: I don't know, he put in windows upside down. Laugh.  
(talk in the background - voice says, "I'm 92". John says, "you don't look it")  
R: I think you all look good for your age.  
J: Niether do you, Richard. How old are you?  
R: I'm 68, and you don't look anywhere near 90. Well now, I want to get a little more of your history.  
When you went back to New Haven, what was the first job you had?  
J: Oh, I don't know, I worked at Winchesters.  
R: When you were quite young, eh?  
J: Yeah, fourteen.  
R: Really? Gee whiz!  
J: Racking up parts for flashlights.  
R: And then what was the next job you had?  
J: Whitney Briggs (sp?) I was a mail boy.  
R: And then after that, what was the next job you had?  
J: I went in the Coast Guard.  
R: Was it the Merchant Marine or the Coast Guard?  
J: It was the Coast Guard. I did two \_\_\_\_\_ enlistments.  
Then I went in the army for three years.  
R: When did you first go in the Coast Guard?  
J: 1923.  
R: So you were pretty young.

J: Yeah, sixteen, I guess. Then I went in the army for three years. Then when I got out of the army in 1927, I went in the Merchant Marines, I stayed there for years and years.

R: Did you actually retire from the Merchant Marines?

J: Yeah. Master Mates and Pilots.

R: What year did you retire?

J: 1967.

R: Could you tell me a little about your experiences during the war, especially.

J: I got torpedoed once.

R: Yeah. What ship were you on then?

J: The Alcoa Rambler.

R: Whereabouts was the ship when you got torpedoed?

J: Four hundred miles north of South America, north of Brazil. We were four and a half days sailing in.

R: So, then you had to go into the lifeboats, eh?

J: Yeah. Four and a half days.

R: Didn't somebody come out and rescue you?

J: No, we sailed in.

R: Really! How could you do that? Put some sails on the lifeboat and...

J: Yeah. We sailed in.

R: And you sailed in to the coast? That must have been tough, huh?

J: Well, we didn't have much water or food...

R: Did most of the people get saved, though?

J: We only lost two men. That was great. Most of them all went down. We lost one tenth of one percent less than the Marine Corps in world war II.

R: Is that right.

J: We lost 7000 ships!

R: That was tough on the Merchant Marines wasn't it? Did you take any of those convoy trips to Murmansk? or places like that?

J: Yes. Only seven of us got through.

(other conversation in background)

R: How many times did you cross...was it only in the atlantic that you served?

J: No, I was in Okinawa when the war ended.

R: Uh hah. Well, did you go through the Panama Canal to get over there?

J: Oh, yes. I went through there many times.

R: Oh, you did. You served in both the Atlantic and Pacific, back and forth, huh, during the war? And what were you when you started, when you went in?

J: Able Seaman.

R: That was the lowest grade?

J: No, Ordinary is the lowest.

R: I see. But you went in as an Able Seaman.

J: Yes. That was because of the Coast Guard.

R: So, what was the total time you served then?

J: Well, I spent 40 years at sea. Maybe not that much at sea, because many times we had to look for ships jobs.

R: Especially before the war I suppose. And you kept sailing after the war quite awhile?

J: Oh, yes. The war was over in '45 and I sailed 'til '67.

R: Well, tell me, when did you get married?

J: In '32.

R: In 1932. Well, you were already in the Merchant Marines at that time.

J: Yes, I was in the Merchant Marines. I started in '27.

R: Your wifes name was Mary, wasn't it?

J: It was Marion.

R: What was her last name?

J: Moldenhauer. German, I guess.

R: Oh, yeah. You were married in '32. How many kids did you have?

J: Three, two boys and a girl.

R: Jackie was the oldest, huh?

J: Yeah.

R: And then who?

J: Donald. He's about 55. And then, Patricia, she's about 50.

R: And I suppose they were all married?

J: Oh, yeah. Patricia has about seven kids.

R: Who did she marry?

J: She married an engineer. They just bought a motel in Florida. In Orlando.

R: Oh, really? We just came from Florida.

J: Did you, really?

R: Yeah, we were in Lake Wales.

J: That's nice. It's up north a little.

R: Yes. And did she have any grand children?

J: I don't know. I don't hear from her at all.

R: Oh, no. But she had seven children anyway.

J: About seven, yes.

R: How about Donald?

J: He has three boys. Nice kids, too. Kevin, Michael, and Timothy.

R: Oh, yeah. They all married, too?

J: Yes. They are all nice kids, too. They are in Mexico.

R: How many grandchildren does Donald have?

J: I know he has two, I don't know about the rest. We don't write to him much.

R: And Jackie, he's got three kids? Or four?

J: He's got about seven. He was married twice. He had three or four by the first and four nice girls by the second.

R: Oh, I see. So there must be some grandchildren there too.

J: Yeah. Could be.

R: You were never in touch with your fathers relatives, when you were sailing over there?

J: No, but I lived in Ireland for a year.

R: Did you? Whereabouts?

J: Londonberry. I worked for the Navy. Wire splicing.

R: When was that?

J: In '41 and '42.

R: Oh, before we got into the war, huh? You never knew where your relatives were in Ireland, though.  
J: No, but I knew where they came from.  
R: Oh. Where was that?  
J: Cork.  
R: Oh, Cork, huh? That's where Robby is.  
J: Robby is there, yes.  
R: So he must have been in touch with some of them maybe.  
J: Probably. I never hear from Bobby. Eleanor has though.  
R: This is another thing we want to do in our celebration this summer. Eleanor gave me a copy of Bobby's poetry, and part of the celebration this summer we are going to have readings of poetry and other writings that people connected with the Swedish Colony up there have done, so we want to read some of Bobby's poetry as part of the celebration. We are doing a lot of different things, and this calendar is one of the big things. It's kind of a fund raiser, you know, we sell the calendars, but also it's nice to keep up the history and the heritage of the place. And then we like to recognize the people who have made it to 90 years old. So that's why we'd like to have you in there. Last year we had twelve people on the calendar who were 90 years old. From that little area, isn't that amazing?  
J: How many people in Stockholm?  
R: Three hundred. A little less than 300 now.  
J: Is that all?  
R: Yup. And New Sweden, which is next door, kind of connected, has about seven or eight hundred now. But Stockholm used to be a big town.  
J: Oh, I remember that, yes. How about Caribou?  
R: Caribou has grown quite a bit, they're probably about ten thousand maybe. What do you remember about Stockholm?  
J: Well, there was only one store there when I was there.  
R: Yeah.  
J: One grocery store.  
R: John Anderson's?  
J: Yeah, I guess so. I don't remember much. I fished every day.  
R: Oh, did you? Down the river?  
J: Yes, in the river.  
R: Did you fish up in any of the lakes?  
J: Yes, Madawaska Lake. Good salmon in there. Good salmon in Ireland, Oh Boy! Every lake has salmon in Ireland.  
R: Are they landlock salmon there or atlantic salmon?  
J: Landlock. Oh, I guess there's atlantic too. The lakes have landlocks.  
R: You did a lot of fishing in your time, eh?  
J: Oh, gee, I fished every time I could.  
R: How about hunting?  
J: I shot a deer in Maine, once. A little doe, and I've regretted it ever since.  
R: That the only time?  
J: A little dry doe.  
R: And that was the only time, huh?

J: Yes. Jackie got two this last year. Winter in Connecticut.

R: Oh, is that right? There's a lot of deer in Connecticut

J: Thirty thousand.

R: Yeah, there's more deer in Connecticut than in Maine.

Bertha Olson: There's more moose in Maine!

R: Yeah. There's a lot of moose up there now.

J: There's a lot of moose now in Connecticut. And in Massachusettes.

R: When you were up in Maine, well, a little before you were up there, there were caribou when they first settled up there, that's why they named the city, Caribou. But I think by the time you got there they were all gone.

J: So were the ...ahhh...lions.

R: Nountain lions.

J: Yeah. There were all killed by 1900.

R: But now, just a few years ago, my mother and I saw a mountain lion, cougar, three different times. But they're very rare, very few people have ever seen them.

J: We've got them out at our place, all kinds of them. We have thousands and thousands of antelope.

R: That's out where, out in New Mexico?

J: Yeah. They're not antelope, they're pronghorns.

R: Oh, I see.

J: Antelope, they wouldn't have them, but they look so much alike they're called antelope. But they're pronghorns and they travel in families. They don't travel in big herds. You see a mother and a father and maybe three little ones. And can they run, oh, cougars can't catch them.

R: Do you still have contacts out in New Mexico?

J: Yeah. I have friends out there.

R: Any of your family out there now?

J: Donald.

R: Oh, yeah, that's where Donald is.

J: He works for Albuquerque General.

R: Oh, does he. Is he a writer, newsman or...

J: No, he's, he has.....the papers. He's in charge of that whole area. He's got a good job.

R: I was going to ask you, how many times do you think you've crossed the atlantic or the pacific in your career.

J: A hundred times, I'd guess.

R: How about crossing the equator?

J: I've passed that many times too.

R: Many times too, eh?

J: .....

R: How about the arctic circle or the antarctic circle, did you ever get that far?

J: No. I was only on freighters that carried cargo. There was no cargo going up that far.

R: What's the most exciting trip you ever had. I suppose when you got torpedoed. But except for that.

J: They were all the same. Not very exciting. We'd be in port two or three days.

R: Tell me about some of the ports you went to.

J: I can't remember all the ports. Usually about 20 times.  
R: How about up in northern Europe. Did you get to any of the scandinavian countries?  
J: Oh yeah, I've been to Stockholm and ...what's the name of that seaport?  
R: Gothenborg? Malmo?  
J: Malmo. There's a shipyard in there.  
R: Copenhagen and Denmark I suppose?  
J: Yes, I've been to Denmark. And I've been to Poland and Russia three times.  
R: Oh, have you. Whereabouts in Russia?  
J: To .....and..... and Odessa years ago.  
R: How about China? and Japan, have you ever been there?  
J: Yes, I've been to China and Australia.  
R: Well, you've really been around the world, huh?  
J: Well, all those years, I had to go somewhere I guess.  
B: Maynard Lind can tell you how many places (he's been). He was in the Merchant Marines he travelled and was in all these ports.  
R: Well, well. You've had quite a career, haven't you.  
J: Yeah, I guess so. It was ordinary to me, tho. So much the sameness.  
R: Are you happy you went into the Merchant Marines?  
J: Well, I would have done something else if not that.  
R: What position did you hold most of the time, when you were in the...  
J: Chief Mate.  
R: And what would the Chief Mate do?  
J: Well, he had charge of the ship. Under the Captain.  
R: He was the next man under the Captain?  
J: Yeah.  
R: But then you were the Captain for...  
J: A couple of years.  
R: A couple of years before you retired?  
J: Yeah.  
R: Hey, gee, this is interesting! To hear about all his career, you know?  
B: Yes! A good story.  
R: Hear about all his career, all his crossings of the atlantic and pacific. Did you ever go down around the Cape?  
J: Oh, yes.  
R: Cape Horn or Cape of Good Hope? That must be a rough trip, huh?  
J: Yeah, it is. It can be.....  
R: Does a lot of shipping go down around the cape instead of going through the canal?  
J: No, they go through the canals.  
R: I can't even remember when they opened the canal. The canals were open when you first got in.  
J: They were open in 1915. The French (sp) lock but they could'nt finish it.  
R: Well, that's very interesting. We'll put a little write-up in our...we're calling these people "nonagenarians", which is a big word that means, "90 years old". And we've



had quite a few. We've been doing this for five years, and I don't know if we'll have quite that many this year. I told Eleanor, we've only got a couple of years to wait and she'll be there.

J: You'll be 88 this summer.

Eleanor: Yes, I'll be 88.

R: You will be 88 in December.

E: I was born in 1907, two years after you.

R: But, Agnes (sister) is in between there. No, Agnes is older, yeah, yeah, yeah.

J: Agnes was a good one.

R: Yes she was. Boy, we all liked her.

J: She was a bastion.

R: And your mother was too.

E: There was nobody better than my mother. She was ....

R: Yeah. That's a good word for her, solid.

....talk in background...

R: She was very steady, right? Never got too excited, and...

J: Never seemed old (sp).

E: "Ag" was the same.

R: Those were the "good old days, eh?"

R: Your wife died quite awhile ago, huh?

J: She died the year I retired. She died of breast cancer.

R: 1960...?

J: 1958, or somewhere around there. We were married 35 years.

....Background talk about Nursing Homes and Nelson Hede needing one, etc.

R: Nelson has been trying to get into a Nursing Home but he can't get in yet.

J: They're crowded with Persian Gulf veterans.

R: So if you get into a good place, you're lucky.

J: He could get in here.

R: Well, I don't know. Probably cost money though.

J: The State pays part of it.

E: This is the best place in the State.

J: Everybody wants to get out of here. Ask any of them.

E: But don't you think it's because they're not happy away from home?

R: That's true about any kind of an institution. But they wouldn't take anybody in here from Maine. The State wouldn't pay for anybody from Maine, would they?

J: No, you've got to be a resident.

R: In Maine there's not that many opportunities. They've got a Veterans Home now up in Caribou they just opened recently.

J: Yes, they've got another one up there too.

R: In Togus they've got one. But up in Caribou, it's hard to get in there.

J: Usually the University runs it.

R: The one up there is connected to the hospital. But it's full all the time and hard to get in. Nelson needs something like that, he can't take care of himself. He's not that old, only 75.

J: There's several here with Parkinson's. She's got multiple.....

R: Eleanor, do you know how many...well, he was just telling me how many children he had, do you know how many grandchildren and greatgrandchildren he has?

J: Eighteen, 18 grandchildren.

R: Oh you do. How about greatgrandchildren?

J: I don't even know.

R: That's harder to keep track of.

J: I guess Jackie's children have children.

R: We could probably count them up if we tried. Ask Jackie how many grandchildren he has, and that would be greatgrandchildren for you.

But your family, the Brown family, were there seven?

J: There was eight.

R: And then you figure all of their children and all of the grand and great grandchildren, really adds up, doesn't it.

J: I knew my grandmother very well, her name was Molly (sp) Sullivan. Her maiden name. She was born in Cork. That was my father's mother. She was a nice woman.

E: Yes, a little spunky woman.

J: Very smart and very spunky.

R: Do you have any idea when they came to America?

J: My father was born in 1880.

R: And where was he born?

J: He was born in Bristol, Rhode Island.

R: So they came some time before that, then.

J: Oh, yes. she was eighteen when she married.

R: Was she married in this country?

J: Yeah, when she came over here.

R: Oh, she was married over here.

How about your father's father?

J: He was part Indian.

R: He was?

J: Part Narragansette.

R: Now, did his parents come from Ireland, too? From Cork?

Or...

J: He was Irish. Part Indian and part Irish. Very small part was Indian, I think.

R: So his ancestors must have come over earlier, then.

What was his father's name?

J: John Brown.

R: His was John Brown, also?

J: My father was John Daniel Brown.

R: When his father was...did he have a middle name?

J: No, no middle name.

R: He must have been born in America, too then.

J: He was born in Rhode Island.

R: If he was part Indian.

J: He was in the Narragansette Tribe. They're the ones that annihilated the Pequods. In the Great Swamp War. They were very mean, vicious Indians, the Narragansettes.

R: That's what they named Narragansettes Bay after, I suppose, huh?

So that branch of the family must have been over here a long time.

J: I guess so. I don't know much about them.

R: Nobody tried to trace it back, eh?

J: You know a lot about yours tho.

R: yeah, it goes back to the 1600's.

J: You were born here, tho, eh?

R: Oh, yeah. But, my father was born in Sweden because he was only two years old when they came. Of course your mother was a little older than that, I don't know how much.

J: My mother was seven.

R: She was seven when she came over?

J: She talked good english, too.

R: Oh, is that right? Kids learn languages fast.

Hey, did she ever tell you anything about the trip coming over?

J: No. She walked around.....down below.

E: That's the one thing, the one thing....

R: That's the only thing you remember?

B: Seven years old?

J: She .....down below.

R: They weren't too happy, I suppose, huh? They didn't throw her overboard?

J: No.

R: Did she say anything about life in the "old country?"

J: No, they came from up where the reindeer live.

R: Up in northern Jemptland.

J: Yeah.

R: Well, actually, she was born in Norway.

J: Who?

R: Your grandmother. Mrs. Hede, Granny Hede. She was born in Norway.

J: She was Norwegian and he was from Sweden.

R: Yeah, and then she came across the border. But, of course, at that time they only had the one king for both countries.

J: Yeah, it was all Sweden.

R: I think she didn't have too happy a childhood, that's why she left Norway and went to Sweden.

J: Sweden was always richer.

R: Yeah, I guess so, probably. But I was wondering if your mother had ever said anything about what she remembers or anything, or what her mother told her. Because she would have remembered more than the rest of them, I guess.

Misc. talk in background about clothing, treats, etc.

R: I've got to ask you something personal. laughter. How many tattoos have you got? And where?

J: About 35, I guess.

R: Have you really? You got tattoos all over the world as you went along.

J: No, I got most of them in New York and San Francisco. And one in Australia.

R: I guess that was the thing to do. 35 tattoos. laughter.  
I guess I wont ask you to show us all of them.  
J: No.

Misc. chatter....

R: I hope you don't mind all this talking, I like to talk, especially about the old days.

J: Yeah.

R: I remember one thing I was going to ask you, you told me what your wifes last name was, but I don't know how to spell it.

J: Moldenhaur.

R: Oh, yeah. That sounds German, all right.

J: They were part Irish, too.

R: Had they been in this country a long time, too, this family?

J: Oh, yeah. A number of years. ....a priest (sp) in West Haven.

R: Oh, I see. Are there still relatives in that branch of the family around?

J: Yeah.....

R: Well, I asked you a lot of questions, I don't know what else to ask you. Can you think of anything?

J: No.

chatter.....

R: China and Japan. Were you there before the war?

J: I was in Japan in 1929. In China in 1929 also.

R: That was still a pretty closed society?

J: Yeah, it wasn't .....

R: Hard to get in and out though?

J: No, no.

R: Had you been to Hong Kong?

J: No, just Hankow and Singapore.

J: (aside) Jeez, I'm so itchy.....skin chatter..

R: And your not able to read anymore, eh?

J: No, not too good, my eyes are blurry.

R: Can that be treated in any way, or...?

J: I don't know. They don't do any thing. They never do anything.

R: How about TV? Can you watch TV?

J: No, I never watch it. My room has one, but I've got a radio.

.....chatter.....

R: In some ways, a radio is much more interesting and entertaining...

J: More than the TV.

R: Yeah, even the old fashioned things they used to have on, like, plays and comedies, like, Amos and Andy, and Jach Benny and all those things. You can imagine some of the stuff on radio much better than you can see on TV.

J: What time is it getting to be?

R: It's almost 3:30.

B: Maybe he wants to go in his room?  
R: You think we ought to be running along now?  
B: I think so.  
J: I'm glad you came.  
R: Well, gee. I am too. Thanks a lot, it was nice to see you again. I was so surprised, when I came, and Eleanor told me you were going to be 90 this year and she was going to be 88. I couldn't believe either one of you..  
J: When did you come down?  
R: Thursday night. And we're here for the weekend. I'll tell you one good thing Jackie did. He made a nice supper last night with a trout he had caught. And I was telling Eleanor that's the best supper I've had in a long while, because usually I've been eating stuff that's been too spicy and it keeps me awake at night. Last night was the first time I've had a good meal and didn't keep burping at night  
J: When did he (Jackie) say he was going to Maine?  
R: Well, he didn't say for sure. When he retires. Sometime this summer, I guess.  
E: It's when it's warm enough so he can start his camp.  
J: There's a woman here from Maine, she said they had a very mild winter in Maine.  
R: That's not true.

THE END

R: So if you get into a good place, you're lucky.  
J: He could get in here.